

Summit Choral Society: Christmas Candlelight Concert (Dec. 20)

by Daniel Hathaway



On Saturday evening in Akron's St. Bernard's Church, the Summit Choral Society gave the second of three Christmas Candlelight Concerts, to a full house, proving that a Christmas concert can offer both substantial and lighter fare and remain thoroughly engaging without resorting to the false allure of tinsel-pop. The two-hour-long program featured the

adult Masterworks Chorale, as well as the Society's youth ensembles — the Touring Choir, Concert Choir and 2014 Alumni Choir — in a dozen selections, many of them written in the last decade or so.

Celebrating its 25th season under the leadership of Frank C. Jacobs, who will retire at the end of the season, the Masterworks Chorale joined the Concert Choir in the opening work. Selections from the late Dave Brubeck's *La Fiesta de la Posada* (1976), a Mexican-inspired 1976 cantata full of charm and spirit, were accompanied by a mariachi-style ensemble, and featured Oberlin student soprano Julie Crookston as the fine soloist in a setting of the *Magnificat*.

The adult singers and Touring Choir combined to sing British composer Bob Chilcott's 2000 *Canticles of Light*, a dreamy setting of three Latin texts incorporating chimes, bells and close diatonic harmonies from the chorus with obbligato cello played by Greg Fiocca.

After the first of three audience sing-along carols, oboist Danna Sundet and flutists George Pope and Jane Berkner added colorful instrumental lines to three selections from the Touring Choir led by Heather Cooper. Jeffrey L. Ames's utterly lovely *Canticle of*

Mary was followed by Gregory Hoepfner's striking *Mary Shivered*, and Nancy Hill Cobb's *Gloria!*, the latter a finale to the first half of the program that allowed the excellent young ensemble to ring out with full voice.

Carl Jenkins's *Benedictus* from *The Armed Man — a Mass for Peace* brought the Masterworks Chorale and Touring Choir down the aisles in a meditative, candlelit processional with cello solo by Greg Fiocca and atmospheric organ accompaniment by Robert Mollard, who also accompanied the sing-alongs and served as the excellent



pianist for the Chorale.

Jeffrey L. Ames's strophic, 2009 setting of *The World of our Dreams* was adorned by a second solo by Julie Crookson and Danna Sundet's soulful oboe obbligato. Ola Gjeilo's *Pleni sunt caeli et terra Gloria Tua* (2010) reprised the gauzy choral textures of the Chilcott (Fiocca returned to supply an expressive a cello solo)

and trumpets added a disquieting color to Jenkins's *Agnus Dei*, also from *The Armed Man* (a modern version of the Renaissance masses based on the mysterious tune, *L'homme armé*).

A second audience sing-along introduced the 2014 Summit Choral Society Alumni Choir, an ensemble that pitched some thirty sopranos and altos against four stalwart male voices — who bravely managed to hold their own. Led by Arlene Jacobs with Kathy Reichenberger at the piano, the choir sang Stan Pethel's catchy 2012 *Carol for Christmastide* while processing in, followed by Joel Raney's 2010 *Celtic Christmas Lullaby* (decorated with flute and cello) and John Rutter's predictably attractive *Love came down at Christmas* (2013).

Filling the aisles and the space at the back of the nave, the combined choirs created atmospheric surround sound for three stanzas of *Away in a Manger* arranged by three different composers, and ended with the a final sing-along, *Silent Night*.

This was an alluring evening of choral music, carefully chosen, lovingly performed and imaginatively choreographed to bring the whole interior space of St. Bernard's into play. The three ensembles of young singers made outstanding contributions to the success of the program. One hopes they'll return in a few years to join the ranks of the Masterworks Chorale.

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